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ABSTRACT

Effective writing assessment involves judging how well a writer is encouraged by the classroom's social context to pull together ideas and to bring experience to bear on abstractions. Four main points can be made to justify this view. First, assessment by standardized test determines a teach-and-test model of instruction. But a curriculum that emphasizes writing processes is richer and can be tested using direct assessment by writing sample, such as the Stanford Writing Assessment Program. Second, teach-and-test models of writing instruction conflict with good writing theory. A good model of writing instruction emphasizes revision, talking, reading, and learning and can be tested through essay questions that pertain to these experiences. Third, assessment by standardized test is a deeply rooted problem allied with the teach-and-test research tradition; both proceed by means of oversimplified logic requiring written products to play an oversimplified role. However, new research teaches a more complicated logic about product. Fourth, this new logic shows that standardized testing needs to be supplemented by assessment that is functional and that recognizes learning as valuable by "giving points" for constructive, integrative acts in students' writing. (Hawaii's educational system is highlighted.) A 27-item reference list is provided. (JD)

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WRITING ASSESSMENT RE-EXAMINED

Some years ago comedian Tom Lehrer, in a little ditty, parodied the New Math. Strumming his guitar in a San Francisco night club, he ran through a complicated explanation as he subtracted one simple number from another. The answer, as it turned out, was wrong. "Oh, well, he said, "the answer's not important, I got there the right way." The audience hooted.

In the teaching of English those with professional training are well aware that "Process" is crucial in the teaching of writing. But Writing Process, like the New Math, will come in for deserved ridicule if no one says what in the end should be assessed. The argument here is that assessment can be rationally carried out. The argument is also that assessors should have their eyes open to what is really going on in the process of writing. What's going on is practice in problem-solving and analysis; what's created is an interactive social context that, from a Vygotskian perspective, is crucial for both language to grow and thinking to fluorish. If

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assessment is doing its job, it needs to judge how well the writer is encouraged by the social context of the classroom to pull things together that otherwise exist for the writer in bits and pieces, and how well the writer is engaged in bringing experience to bear on abstractions. Writing should be assessed for how well it succeeds in doing all of this.

But this is getting ahead of the story. To arrive at this conclusions, four arguments about writing assessment need to be made:

1. Assessment by standardized test determines curriculum. It conveys to teachers a teach-and-test model of instruction.
2. Such a model of instruction conflicts with good writing theory, a problem that may be alleviated by changing the test somewhat.
3. Still the problem is deep-rooted. Assessment by standardized test is allied with a teach-and-test research tradition; both assessment and this brand of research proceed by means of an oversimplified logic that requires products to play an oversimplified role. New research teaches a new and more complicated logic about product.
4. This newer logic shows that standardized testing needs to be supplemented by assessment that is functional.

Point 1: *Assessment procedures are, in effect, a model of instruction.*

On this point I have a story to tell about the assessment of writing skills in Hawaii that is no doubt closely paralleled by stories in other districts and countries.

The state of Hawaii has a central administration for state

education, including two people whose whole job is to do nothing but test. These people--and interviewed one of these two, the director, a smart and sensitive man--have been looking for a new and better way to assess writing. They think that multiple-choice testing is invalid, and direct assessment by writing sample a better way. In order to assess by writing sample, they have adopted the Stanford Writing Assessment program, which sets out four different writing tasks. One of these tasks calls for description, one for narration, one for reasoning, and one for explaining. Children are tested in Grades 3, 6, 8 and 10; last year was the first year for the test, and it was given only to third graders, but older children will be tested as the years go by. The testing director, because he wishes to take as little time as possible out of the school day, asked last year for one writing sample only, the describing sample. The sample was scored both holistically and for various traits, and the numerical scores were sent back to the school. For the sake of varying the task, this year's third graders will do the narrating, not the describing task that last year's children did.

Test scores in Hawaii are big news. The reading and math scores are published in Honolulu's paper. For each school the paper lists the per cent below the range of the national average, the percent within this range, and the percent above. Statewide, Hawaii is a little above the national average in math, somewhat below in reading. Real estate brokers want the latest figures since the value of houses is affected by the average scores in the local neighborhood schools; this is especially so in affluent neighborhoods such as Kahala near

Diamond Head. Reading comprehension and math are therefore extremely important values in the community. Now that writing too can be assessed in numerical terms, averaged, and compared with the scores of other districts in the islands, writing scores too will be newsworthy.

As you know, standardized testing has led many teachers to teach by ditto sheet exercises instead of books and discussion. What, one wonders, will it do to writing? In particular, I asked the director of testing in Hawaii how he thought the Stanford Assessment Test of Writing might affect classroom teaching. I knew the issue concerned him. Yes, it was a problem, he said, the whole question of teachers teaching to the test. Since there were only two people to carry out standardized testing for the entire state, the tie-in with instruction had to be handled by the instructional division. People in the instructional division held meetings with the supervisors of language arts for the various islands, and on the island of Oahu, for the various districts--the Leeward district, the Windward district, the Honolulu district, and so on. These supervisors, in turn, explained to teachers how the test related to instruction.

Let me reassure you. Even in a system like this one, the news about the test travels quickly to the schools. The word gets out. At a recent one-day conference on assessment, I asked a third grade teacher from the blue collar area of Pearl City--some 20 miles from the center of Honolulu--how she thought the new assessment in writing was working. "Better this year than last," she said. "This year they had a workshop and told us it was narrative. Last year we didn't know it was

describing, so we didn't know what to prepare the children to do."

What will happen in this classroom to reasoning, explaining and describing? Is only narrating important for third graders to learn? Obviously the testing director did not think so, and did not intend to communicate this. But the teacher, knowing how important it is for her children to do well on the test--the Pearl City neighborhood has pride just as Kahala has--seems quite ready to forsake other forms of writing. Things could be worse--narrative is not a bad choice if one must choose a single form--but richer is a curriculum that includes explaining, describing, and reasoning.

I do not envy the director-of-testing his job. He was probably never told by anyone that he, more than anyone else in the educational establishment, was going to set curriculum, and he makes no claims to knowing what classroom exercises make for the best instruction. Yet the test itself and the way it sits in judgment on teaching have made him into an authority figure. Test scores are easy to understand; they are in education the Great Communicators, and in the end they say what to teach and what to leave out of the daily schedule. We know that for years when writing was hardly evaluated at all, the time spent on it in the classroom declined to a horrifying few minutes each day. Now that writing is back in the curriculum, teachers will no doubt decide *what to teach* by looking at what is assessed down the line.

Point 2. *Teach-and-test models of instruction conflict with good writing theory.*

In Hawaii and elsewhere there is a serious mismatch between two instructional models--the model communicated by the test and the model that ought to be in place in day-to-day classroom teaching. To improve the Hawaii test, one simple thing can be done: draw from a hat the kind of task that will be required and not announce it in advance. The message to teachers then changes; not one but four kinds of thinking and writing are important; not one but four kinds should be done by the children in the classroom.

But still the greater problem will remain: the difficulty of making the instrument of assessment match up with a good model of instruction. A good model of writing instruction--a "process" model--views writing not as a skill exercised in isolation but an activity whose purpose is made plain by other activities that come before and after it. Good teachers have always somehow known this, but now a rich body of literature argues this as well. The bibliography lists samples from the literature that can be placed in four categories: (1) the writing development of young children 3-6, (2) the development of children 7-11, (3) the development of secondary and college students, and (4) articles on overall development. All of these argue that writing instruction should rest on four pillars--revision, talk, reading, and learning.

1. **Revision.** Learning to write requires time for students to re-write and incentive to re-write (for example, Perl, 1979).

2. **Talk.** Talk should occur often and in small groups, as a response to writing read aloud (for example, Martin, 1976).

3. **Reading.** Writing should sometimes serve to make sense of reading, to bring prior knowledge to bear on reading, to motivate the reader to read more (for example, Calkins, 1983).

4. **Learning.** Writing should make writers curious about their topic. Writing is a way of making story and argument out of otherwise fragmented bits of information. From writing come two kinds of results--learning to write and just plain learning--which should not be separated (Britton, et al, 1975).

Now let us look at writing tasks for standardized testing. Do these allow time for revision? Almost never. Do they allow students time to talk to each other after writing a first draft? No. Do they ask for writing as a reaction to reading? Do they ask the writer to bring personal experience to bear on reading? Almost never. Are the samples evaluated for what the writer learned in doing them? No.

I am a practical person and I see that the standardized testing of writing is mandatory in the U.S. Otherwise, writing loses out to reading and math in the competition for time in the daily schedule, and writing remains invisible in the public eye. Yet in no way can the writing of a standardized test sample replicate the writing activities that go on in good classrooms. By its very nature as a test item, the sample is finished within a single sitting. It is not practical to combine reading with writing in the test because the pressure of the test allows too little time to react intelligently, and the writing that results looks undigested and incoherent. To have the students read ahead of time--a day or two ahead--creates a flurry of teaching to the test. As for talk and small-group response, it is impractical to suppose that pupils can write a draft, consult their response groups, mull over the response and then write their test essay. Instructions for administering a test of this kind would be

impossibly complicated. So the problem is how to solicit a writing sample from students that will typify the writing they do under admittedly different circumstances in the classroom, how to ask for a sample in a way that will not do violence to the four-pillar teaching approach.

I have a modest proposal--no irony intended, for this is truly modest--which might work well in a teaching community where members agree on the value of integrated language arts. In a school of this kind children will have memories aplenty to write about if they are asked to recall a time during the year when they worked on a piece of writing that was important to them. Again there would be four questions, one of which would be drawn from a hat. One of the four, phrased in a way to suit the age level, would ask the students to explain or describe the experience of doing this writing. The experience would include any reading, talking, or learning that--in the mind of the student--was related to the writing.

Would this work?

Teachers would need to agree in advance that this type of question was a good one; in fact, reaching teacher concensus by talking together would be part of the benefit. There would be further benefits as well. The test question, even if only one of the four, would be tied to and supportive of the values of the teaching community. It would make clear reference to instructional policy. Yes, it would mix up writing skill with prior knowledge, but knowledge should be considered an essential part of the product, not a confounding variable. And, yes, a new child moving in from another district might have to be given a different question. And, yes, the test

results could hardly be compared to national norms. But this kind of writing question would do something important in a teaching community that shows signs of wanting to adopt a common broad policy for the teaching of writing. It would acknowledge the fact that assessment is more than an instrument of evaluation; it is also an instrument of communication and mutual support.

I remain tentative in making this suggestion because I suspect that in most places teachers would find it hard to gain concensus among themselves, especially if they were to buck the trend toward greater use of standardized testing and national norms. It is clear that in their rather uncomfortable relationship with assessment, teachers feel they should go along in the direction that assessment sets.

Point 3. *The problem is deep-rooted. Assessment by standardized test is allied with a teach-and-test research tradition; both assessment and this brand of research proceed by means of an oversimplified logic that requires products to play an oversimplified role. New research teaches a new and more complicated logic about product.*

This is the bigger picture, the bigger problem: in the relationship between writing instruction and writing assessment, instruction finds it hard to speak up. I now want to argue that this larger picture should change.

How instruction came to be the dominated partner is a question that Frank Smith answers in this way: both instruction and assessment took their lead from learning theory. Learning theory came from departments of psychology,

which were themselves dominated by experimental design and by the whole behaviorist tradition of research. This tradition made assessment by numerical method the underpinning for research in learning, and this is how numbers got to be king. The whole tradition, argues Smith, is better suited to learning by rats than learning by humans.

To some extent I disagree. Quantitative methods are not the culprit; we just have to be sure that what we count is what we want to count. But, like Smith, I point my finger at the experimental tradition--and many others have done so as well. From the 1920s through the 1960s we were all led to believe that written products were the result of an independent variable called "teaching," and that given the right teaching, you should get the right product. A single cause, single effect. Not only was this an oversimplified approach to teaching; it was also an oversimplified approach to product itself, as though the product were either right or so many degrees along the path toward being right. Picking up a piece of writing, teachers have been trained to say, "This one is good on organization, good in grammar, poor in style, poor in ideas, overall fair." This one is so many degrees toward being something a reader wants to read and finds acceptable to the eyes.

But what if one turned this logic of assessment around and looked at products in terms of their usefulness to the writer? Imagine yourself at the site of an archaeological dig. Anthropologists standing at this site are interested in products. But they say more than "this bowl you've just dug up has fine lines--notice the color and sophisticated design."

They also say, "Look at this bowl and its peculiar shape; these people must have had a special use for it. And in this other bowl, you can see an early attempt to use glazing; how different from later bowls of the same culture."

The difference in these remarks is the difference between two kinds of evaluation, one aesthetic and the other functional. As for writing, the aesthetic evaluator asks, "How effective is this piece of writing in terms of reader response?" The functional evaluator asks, "How did this product serve the writer? what was it used for? what was the writer trying to do?"

To be in line with writing as an instrument of learning, assessment has to be, in part, functional. It has not been functional in the past.

Enter at this point Research. Not quite on a white horse but certainly different from the old experimental tradition and its heavy emphasis on large samples and large numbers. Going down the list of references at the end of this paper, one finds that researcher after researcher is looking at the writer as individual and is looking at writing as it leads in and out of talking, revising, and thinking.

"Why do little kids use listing so much?" ask people such as Clay and Newkirk.

"What do students do when they revise?" asks Perl. "What causes writer's block?" asks Rose.

"How does writing lead into reading?" ask Harste, Woodward, and Burke.

In every case the researchers ask what the writers are doing and why. And in every case the products are examined

much as an anthropologist examines a bowl: what is the user doing with this and what does the user get out of it?

Is it any wonder that a research model of this kind has become a teaching model? Graves has commented that what began for him as simple classroom research became a teaching model, quite without his intending it. Is it any wonder that good writing teachers naturally turn to this kind of classroom research themselves? Process teaching (or 4-pillar teaching) and descriptive research support each other. Now assessment needs to come on board as well.

Schools have had writing assessment for years, and now school districts are about to launch into industrial strength standardized testing. Has any of this, or will any of this, show which writers use writing to explore new concepts? Does any of this assessment say whether or not the writer used writing to respond to talk? This is assessment's job, but assessment is not doing it.

Numbers are important, but numbers are not king. A new tradition of research should now tell assessment what it needs to do; what it needs to do is say whether or not a young writer is using writing for purposes of pulling things together and making sense out of them.

Point 4. *The standardized testing of writing should be supplemented by assessment that is functional.*

I now have another proposal, this one less modest. What I propose is to show assessment how to find evidence of constructive acts in written products. The list below names constructive acts that young writers have been seen to carry

out.

CONSTRUCTIVE AND INTEGRATIVE ACTS

1. Is the writer trying out a new form?

2. Is the writer referring to reading, or perhaps imitating reading?

3. Is the writer making jokes, playing with words, or working for visual effect?

4. Is the writer attempting to integrate thoughts brought up in a recent discussion?

5. Does the writer attempt to include elaborative detail within a narrative that really has function within the narrative?

6. If the topic is new to the writer, does the writer attempt to relate it to prior knowledge?

7. Does the writer attempt to use conceptual language recently acquired?

8. Does the writer attempt, either consciously or unconsciously, to make writing conform with a principle of writing style?

The point for assessment is that learning is valuable, and where the writer attempts to carry out one or more of the acts above, the assessor should give points. I am still a practical person, still concerned with devising systems of evaluation that will work. Assessors are smart people; they can be taught to read products with an eye to the learning functions I have mentioned here. Products are usually quite transparent in this

regard; teachers in particular can spot the place in the text where the writer is trying something new.

Functional assessment could be carried out, I would suggest, on a school-wide basis. A checklist style of form could be filed away in the individual child's test folder, if there were such a thing, in the school's main office; the form could show what kind of new learning the writer has used writing *for*. This record could serve as part of the basis for the student's report card. Most important, it would send a message to each language arts teacher from the teaching leadership:

Learning is important. And in this school, writing serves a learning purpose.

Many in the field of English teaching are interested in so-called "process" approaches, but none can afford to leave product out. Assessors need to be taught how to read products with an eye toward the writer's learning purpose. Knowledge in transition has a way of sounding rough, undigested, perhaps "copied" and out of tune with the writer's voice. Teachers need to teach assessors that this is the case. Doing so would help to set the relationship right between instruction and assessment.

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